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Thailand reports Viets mine border with Cambodia

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ARANYAPRATHET, Thailand — Vietnamese troops are mining the Thai-Cambodian border and forcing some 80,000 Cambodian civilians to erect bamboo and barbed wire barricades, according to Thai military officers here.

The operation apparently is designed to cut supply lines to Cambodian resistance units from refugee camps in Thailand.

One source, who requested anonymity, told The Washington Times that the Vietnamese apparently forced the civilians from their homes deep in the Cambodian interior and brought them, perhaps on foot, hundreds of miles to the frontier.

"Our intelligence tells us that at least 80,000 Cambodian civilians, maybe more, are constructing bamboo and barbed-wire barricades, while the Vietnamese troops plant the mines," the military source said. "We're also hearing that many of those civilians may be dying of malaria and other diseases."

The Thais are concerned that Thai civilians or civilians from refugee camps on the Thai side may wander into the minefields.

Western sources in the capital of Bangkok were unable to confirm the Thai military reports but said the information appeared credible.

The Vietnamese, the Thai source said, appear determined to mine most, if not all, of the Thai-Cambodian border before the dry season ends in May. During the rainy season, heavy flooding would prevent such activity.

So far, during the dry season that began in November, the Vietnamese have refrained from their usual offensive against Cambodian resistance fighters operating along the Thai border. They are concentrating instead on cutting Khmer supply lines.

"We won't rest until the dry season ends, but we're not expecting any full-scale attacks," the Thai source added. "They're too busy with the mines."

The Vietnamese border activity coincides with suggestions from both the Soviet Union and Vietnam

that Hanoi may seek a political solution to the Vietnamese-Cambodian conflict that has dragged on for seven years.

In Moscow, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa indicated to reporters his government is losing patience with the war. The Soviet Union has been Hanoi's major foreign backer since the Vietnamese occupied the nation of 7 million people.

The Vietnamese also have said they would like to be out of Cambodia by 1990, although Western analysts take this to mean that Hanoi hopes to crush all resistance by then.

In this busy border region, Thai officials supervise operations at the largest of several refugee camps harboring Cambodians. They also monitor Viet military operations. The atmosphere is always tense and there are periodic exchanges of shellfire with the Vietnamese during the dry season.

In all, about 240,000 Cambodian refugees are living in the Thai camps, waiting to gain entry either to the United States or another nation.

Although the sprawling, dusty camps ostensibly house only civilians, Thai military officials acknowledge that Cambodian resistance fighters use the camps as operation bases.

"It's tough to stop them," one Thai soldier said.

Last year, during the 1984-85 dry season, Vietnamese forces were successful in driving Cambodian resistance troops from their bases in western Cambodia into the refugee camps on the Thai side.

That assault seemed to weaken the fragmented resistance alliance that has had little success against the Vietnamese occupiers. Since 1979, three separate resistance groups have fought to overthrow a puppet government headed by Heng Samrin.

Heng Samrin and most members of the government were once members of the Khmer Rouge, whose brutal leader, Pol Pot, was toppled by the Vietnamese. Before the invasion, Pol Pot had been responsible for the deaths of at least 1 million Cambodians in his attempts to restructure Cambodian society.